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**Post-prison roads
Situation of Political Prisoners and Prisoners of Conscience in Syria
After Being Released from Custody**

(Report)

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Introduction

Arrests for Political Crimes: Theoretical Concept

Since the creation of authority and the appearance of active political and social forces in societies, cases of resistance, defiance and refusal to accept the facts has taken different forms of opposition. This is a direct result of mankind's quest for a just explanation of the conditions of life.

Every challenge to a present political regime and every rejection are forbidden by authority. Such acts often lead to the detention of people and their disappearance inside political prisons without valid legal sentences. Oppressive practices differed between societies, depending on their respective political regimes and the active political and social forces within such societies.

Michel Foucault considers that the systems of punishment evolved across history towards the total control and submission of the body. The purpose of punishment has not only been to control and subdue the body, or as Foucault calls it: "the political technology of the body"; but more importantly, to affect the mind and make the mind submissive. The body is only a means of controlling the mind. The mind is the source of movement and activity, so the goal of torture is to produce submissive bodies and packaged conscience. The mechanisms of punishment and the means of torture and submission developed from hanging and crucifixion to death by firing squad and electrical shock. The phenomenon of political arrest is nothing new, although it seems endemic in non-democratic countries suffering from dictatorial, theocratic and autocratic regimes.

One may define political detention in two ways. First, according to Amnesty International, prisoners of conscience are those who are arrested because of their religious, political or any other set of beliefs, including their ethnicity, gender, race, language, national or social background, economic position, or any other position, even if they do not use violence.

Second, political prisoners are defined as those arrested for the opinion and belief that they express against the authorities in their countries. Although both definitions greatly overlap, the term prisoner of conscience is wider than the term political prisoner. Usually the material conditions of political prisoners are worse and less fair than the conditions of ordinary inmates, in a legal context of lack of effectiveness, and the silence of organized and informal civil and communal activity. Consequently, the effects of political detention on the psychological and social levels are more dramatic, considering that the political prisoner is treated, from the legal perspective, more badly than non-political (criminal)

prisoners in undemocratic regimes, insofar as the conditions of arrest, investigation, trial, or the resulting sentences and additional punishments are concerned.

Authorities that practice this type of arrest regard the political prisoner as an extremely dangerous criminal, a traitor or an enemy to the homeland, especially in political contexts that mix authority and patriotism. Often the abusive treatment of political detainees is legitimized through the penal codes and other laws of exception, as the existing political authorities have the power to arbitrarily set the degree of danger of the political detainee and the legitimacy of his action, on the legal and social level, and as they are able to fabricate accusations against the political activist, which gradation could lead to treason.

All of this applies to the Syrian situation that has known these types of political arrests and is still leaving with them until this moment. The number of Syrians who have been arrested and who have experienced the ordeal of imprisonment is a large percentage and an amount one cannot ignore. The tragedy of the detention experience does not end with the release of the prisoner but also extends to all aspects of his life after imprisonment. This Report will discuss the tragedy of prisoners of conscience and the experience of political prisoners in Syria following their release, relying primarily on testimonies of former prisoners.

Political Arrests in Syria

Syria, which has lived under the state of exception since March 8th, 1963, has been the theatre of some grave violations of human rights. Such violations ranged from extra-judicial executions, which were heavily resorted to in the 1980s, to forced disappearances, torture, ill treatment and other violations. In all such violation, political arrest was a necessary prelude. Political arrest has become organized and methodological since the beginning of the 1980s. Syria had known political arrest during military coups, which required, at the time, the silencing political opponents. There are no exact statistics on the number of citizens that have been arrested and continue to be arrested. The newly formed Syrian human rights organizations have started recording incidents of political arrests as of 2003, although one cannot exaggerate the level of accuracy of such lists for a variety of reasons. In any event, political parties and human rights organizations have estimated the number of those arrested since the beginning of the 1970s to the 1980s at tens of thousands of people. A large group of individuals have been subjected to forced disappearance. They remain unaccounted for with no information given to their families. Human Rights organizations have estimated the number of missing persons at somewhere around 17,000.¹

The Syrian political prisoners are affiliated to a variety of political currents and groups. The most important of these are:

Arrested before 2000:

1. Muslim Brotherhood
2. Communist and Left-wing Parties
3. Various Palestinian Groups
4. Lebanese Citizens
5. People arrested for other reasons, such as: affiliation to the Iraqi Baath Party, supporters of Gamal Abdul Nasser, the Islamic Liberation Party, or as family members of accused held hostage, or based on security vexatious denunciations, etc.

Arrested after 2000:

1. Arrested because of their Islamic background (jihadists - fundamentalists and Islamic Liberation Party), which constitute the largest proportion of detainees.

¹ See statement of Syrian committee for human rights, date 4 March 2006 attached with list of about 4000 names of people were enforced disappearance in Syria

2. **Kurdish detainees, which have been arrested because of their participation in public events in support of the Kurdish cause in Syria.**
3. **Civil society activists and opposition to the regime**
4. **Muslim brotherhood affiliation for those returning from their exiles.**
5. **Other reasons, including vexatious security denunciations or public criticism of the government and the political regime in Syria**

Political arrest is accompanied by a number of other violations, which can be summarized as follows:

1. **Arrest is conducted extra-legally by different branches of the security apparatus. It is not uncommon that the detainee is subject to forced disappearance, at least for the first months or years of detention.**
2. **Torture and ill treatment is systematically resorted to during the investigation phase that can last many months;**
3. **Trials are held before exceptional tribunals, which do not respect the minimum standards of justice, such as the state's High Security Court in Damascus and the military court marshals. In addition, military courts are currently occasionally used to try prisoners of conscience.**
4. **Detention without trial for long periods of time, which could last the whole period of detention.**
5. **Solitary confinement and denial of visiting rights**

This Report will not deal with the suffering of the detainee during the period of detention, which vary in form and type, although some aspects of this suffering might be alluded to in the Report.

As of the beginning of the 1990s, the Syrian authorities began releasing a variety of people from different backgrounds. The last wave of release was in November of last year, although arbitrary and extra-judicial arrest is still ongoing.

The first concern of an arrested person is to regain freedom and return to society. When such a person is released, the initial pleasure of savoring freedom often wears off.

The Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, as approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1985 provides in Article 19 that: "states should consider incorporating into the national law norms proscribing abuses of power and providing remedies to victims of such abuses. In particular, such remedies should include restitution and/or compensation, and necessary material, medical, psychological and social assistance and support."

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners provide for a collection of principles, which are included in a Section, entitled "Social Relations and After-care," that deal with the most elementary details of the life of a released person:

Article 79:

“Special attention shall be paid to the maintenance and improvement of such relations between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the best interests of both.”

Article 80:

“From the beginning of a prisoner’s sentence consideration shall be given to his future after release and he shall be encouraged and assisted to maintain or establish such relations with persons or agencies outside the institution as may promote the best interests of his family and his own social rehabilitation.”

Article 81:

- (1) “Services and agencies, governmental or otherwise, which assist released prisoners to re-establish themselves in society shall ensure, so far as is possible and necessary, that released prisoners be provided with appropriate documents and identification papers, have suitable homes and work to go to, are suitably and adequately clothed having regard to the climate and season, and have sufficient means to reach their destination and maintain themselves in the period immediately following their release.”**
- (2) “The approved representatives of such agencies shall have all necessary access to the institution and to prisoners and shall be taken into consultation as to the future of a prisoner from the beginning of his sentence.”**

Political prisoners in Syria are not accorded any of the protection provided for therein. On the contrary, new forms of suffering are often experienced by the political prisoner. Part of it is connected to his or her situation before detention (family, finances, etc.), and the other part is related to his or her suffering during detention (the consequences of the physical and psychological torture, as well as sentencing by special tribunals). Such suffering is further compounded by the circumstances in the public and private spheres that would surround the prisoner upon release, which almost completely lack any form of assistance and support that he or she might need.

Such suffering occurs despite the fact that “political crime” in the legal sense constitutes a cause for the granting of better detention conditions, when compared with normal inmates, as recognized by a majority of legal systems in the world. One further notes that the majority of the cases of political detention in Syria occurs in a background of peaceful expression of opinion and exercise of fundamental freedoms, such as the joining of political parties or the participation in public activities, which could not be depicted as “crimes” in the legal sense.

Nevertheless, the political detainee is treated according to a logic that almost completely sets aside law, in a process that ignores the very citizenship of political prisoners, and denies them all rights arising there from.

At the same time, law students at the Faculty of Law of the University of Damascus read in their course books of Criminal Law, under the heading “political crimes” the following: “Modern legislations are correct when they make the distinction between political

criminals and common law criminals during prosecution, and in punishment , given that the former do not commit their crimes for their own selfish and personal benefits, but because of what they believe to be the pursuit of the public interest and the realization of the people's goals and aspirations, according to the ideology that they strive to endorse.

The Political Prison Social and Psychological Effects

General Introduction.

Man has invented intricate methods of torturing his fellow man, by using the most cruel and harmful ways to subdue and control others. The duration and the circumstances of detention inscribe themselves on the prisoner in many levels.

- 1. The physical level: especially in respect of the health effect resulting from torture, which can lead to the chronic illness of the concerned detainee and can cause serious and permanent harm;**
- 2. The social level: especially in respect of problems of interaction with the social milieu and disorder due to the difficulty in mixing with the variety of types of people; and**
- 3. The psychological level: especially in respect of the effects caused by the psychological violence of the prison, which in turn lead to psychological disorders including the difficulty to overcome the prison experience, social and psychological alienation, as well as non-acceptance of the other, and aggressive and reclusion attitudes.**

When all such practices are applied to the prisoner, they tend to cause changes in his or her personality in many ways, including:

- a hardened personal character that is unable to adapt;**
- emotional instability;**
- impaired ability to think and judge;**
- serious agony and disturbance, permanent alertness and fear; and**
- violent behavior, overemotional and irrational physical reactions**

The causes of the above symptoms are not only due to the harsh experience of the prison, but more seriously for the character of the prisoner reentering society is the way in which his friends and family react to his experiences. The level of social acceptance and the degree of the positive or negative judgment of the prisoner greatly participate in the mitigation of such negative effects on the prisoner. This is especially important in societies such as the Arab society, where independent and specialized civil society organizations are either non-existent or of limited effect.

It would therefore appear that the most pressing demands at this stage concern the efforts to concentrate on rehabilitation projects and initiatives as well as practical project with the aim of helping prisoners reintegrating society in a healthy way, by showing that they can resume being active elements in social, political and cultural life.

In returning to the social and family life of the prisoner (family, husband, wife, children, friends), one notices that the structure of the relationships in our society participate, positively and negatively, in either deepening or overcoming the problem of the relationship between the prisoner in his or her social environment and mitigating the probable and expected psychological effects. It has a major role in overcoming the various crises following the release from prison, because of its major effect on the life of the individual, despite the changes that have affected the Syrian family during the past four decades. As a result of this, the level of community understanding and acceptance of the prisoner's experience could prevent him from falling into a social and psychological crisis.

The released prisoner suffers a great deal from a problem of reintegration, which main causes appear to be the prison's policies and mechanisms of operation. A small and narrow society develops inside the prison, which is different from the external society. This internal society is governed by a special culture, in the true sense, and a set of standards centered on the feeling of disadvantage, injustice and violence. The main rules and general guidelines that develop inside the prison can be difficult to leave behind after release, especially given that the prisoner may have engaged in considerable effort to adapt to his or her situation inside the prison. The prisoner finds himself compelled to invent and rediscover ways that would help him reengaging with the broader society, as such problems are presented as his or her own according to the existing social standards and traditions. This surely involves a double effort to be exerted when compared with an individual who did not suffer from the prison experience and the consequent isolation from society.

One can further affirm that women that experience political prisons suffer twice, for different reasons, especially when the concepts of honor and purity remain present in the woman's family. Methods of torture do not save any form of physical and spiritual affliction that purport to indistinctly violate manhood and womanhood. Rape or the allusion thereto and threat thereof are used as tools of interrogation and punishment. These also include electric shock and other forms of torture or verbal abuse committed by the investigators. It is probably because of the fear, shame, social sensitivity, silence, avoidance, or what can be called the taboo (woman – purity) in general, that one encounters the experience of male political prisoner more frequently than women. The anxiety created by the interest and role of the woman in the public sphere generally motivates this fear.

Social and Psychological Effects on the Political Prisoner

The Practical Side.

“The emotional and psychological situation was the second shock after the initial shock of arrest where the feeling of exile is still dominant.”

Gh. A., former political prisoner for nine years²

In order to know the effects of the experience of the political prison in Syria on the social and psychological level, interviews of political prisoners have been conducted over different periods of time. They discuss their experiences and their relationships to all aspects of their public and private lives, including their relatives, family and the surrounding society. A number of special cases were observed, such as cases of legal or psychological divorce and separation, especially for those prisoners who suffered from such an experience as directly affected their public and private lives. Thorough and upon interviews were conducted with a large number of political prisoners, but then ten cases were then closely followed and monitored.³

Although the group of political prisoners is not greatly homogeneous, common and shared experiences can still be found. The differences in individual cases have to do with the ways in which a prisoner overcomes his or her problems upon release. Despite this, we do not seek to generalize the results of these interviews to cover all experiences after release. The goal is to provide an initial representation of the social and personal suffering of the political prisoner in the period following his or her incarceration, in a serious attempt to create a program of action that purports to help political prisoners overcoming the social and psychological difficulties that tend to leave visible traces on them and their families. The individuals interviewed included persons affiliated to a variety of political currents. They were divided by gender and by periods of time spent in prison.

Questionnaires concentrated on the following points :

1. acceptance by the family (parents, siblings, spouse, children);
2. social acceptance (relatives, friends and the neighborhood);
3. differences of values and their effects on reintegration;

² This testimony is quoted from the forum “Memory”, a project of activists and former political prisoners to document the problems of political imprisonment. The goal is to build a national memory and not to forget the value of these rare experiences.

³ At the request of the prisoners interviewed, only their first initials have been used.

4. evaluation on the experience (positive or negative) and the effects on overcoming the experience; and
5. effects of the experience on the personality and their effects in dealing with the community

On an analytical level the research concentrated on the following points:

1. social adaptation: by the prisoner and the adaptation of the family, relatives, friends and neighborhood with the prisoner.
2. psychological adaptation (disposition and traditions)
3. political activity after release

The individual responses revolved around the following points:

Social adaptation

Many elements have played a role in helping the political prisoner to overcome the pressure and the moral and physical defeat of incarceration and in the process of reintegration into society. These elements remain tied to the family, including family acceptance, and the psychological traits of the prisoner. Therefore, there are differences in the speed of reintegration and in overcoming the negative parts of the experience.

The following elements help social adaptation:

1. Acceptance by the Family of the Prisoner's Political Actions:

Acceptance by the family of the political actions of the prisoner or his right to make his own political choice helps make the prisoner's experience a challenging one and not a disappointment. The family's appreciation of the prisoner's experience eliminates many of the difficulties in the prisoner's life, especially when leaving the narrow society of prison, where violence is the main aspect to a larger society containing a mixture of styles and contrasts. This can lead to real obstacles for the prisoner.

Many families contribute in establishing the seriousness and the positive side of the experience. They can also help the prisoner to work through economic problems inside prison and during the initial period after release. This was evident from most of the people interviewed, however the result was the opposite for people whose families blamed and admonished them. This reaction created real problems inside the family and as a result social problems formed.

And just as the family environment can have a positive effect on the prisoner's social adjustment, it may also have a negative effect by contributing to his feeling of isolation. This complicates his assimilation into the community and hinders the possibility of using his personal experience as an element of encouragement. Such an outcome happened in some families, contributing to problems within the family because of differences that emerged between spouses, siblings or in the relationships within the family in general.

This issue remains an individual and unique experience. The prisoner who is released into public life has to exert a double effort. In each stage of the prisoner's life, he must choose methods of adjustment that suit his environment or community. This is done in the absence of organizations and associations that address the crisis that arises from the differences of place, time and social environment between the prisoner and his community.

For this reason the composition and values of the prisoner's family play a decisive role in how negatively the experience effects people both within the family and in the community.

In this respect, many of the prisoners we met, who had been incarcerated for extended periods of time, confess that social relationships became consumerist. This caused them problems as they deal in accordance with the same habits experienced before imprisonment, in addition to the change they note in the position and the role of the individuals inside the family. The former detainee, Ms. Doha Al Askari has stated: *"the social position inside the family and community is missing, so you should reevaluate your position to reconfirm and justify yourself. You also need to rebuild what has been lost concerning your health, studies and career."*⁴

Another prisoner interviewed has seen the difficulties in adapting to his social duties, especially in marriage and its auxiliary aspects like visits from family and friends and the social norms in general.

Women appear to assume a larger portion of the effects of political activism for the reasons mentioned earlier. Such effects revolve around the male-dominated structure of the community and the low rank of women in the family arrangement, who are often regarded as the weakest chain.

Again we see the role of the structure and culture of the family in accepting the woman's political activism, by recognizing her role positively in its proper context. Although one notes the existence of many families that deny political activism to women and refuse for political and moral reasons that they be concerned with public affairs, one remarks that there still exist families that permit political activism to women because of and the nature of their social environment. If this occurs, it is because of a general environment that treats men and women equally with respect to political work.

As an example, Mrs. Roset Issa⁵, who has been among the first female political prisoners of Syria in 1978, was held prisoner for two years under military arrest. As she recalled, having a woman prisoner was striking even for the prison guard. The

⁴ Former political prisoner for six years between 1993 and 1999 on the charge of belonging to the Communist Labor Party (Hezeb Al Amel).

⁵ Former political prisoner for belonging to the Communist Labor Party (Hezeb Al Amel).

security police tried to spread accusations against her based on moral allegations. According to Roset's testimony, the security services tried to approach family and relatives in order to damage her reputation, both on a moral and religious basis as they were members of the Leftist Worker's League.

Such actions caused great difficulties for some women in dealing with their respective social communities because of the recentness of the political imprisonment of women. Even if some displayed a little understanding, this was only limited to the father, mother and siblings. It wasn't the same for more distant relatives. From the beginning this established a barrier in dealing with the female prisoner. The fear of the security apparatus also played a role. However, the effects of political imprisonment on women are greater than they are for men. Even with the family and children, the woman is usually held more accountable than the man.

In an eloquent testimony, Doha Askari says *"the most important part of my experience as a woman was that they placed me in a standard civil prison and there was some fear. I was afraid they would involve me in drug cases or things like that, or to falsely accuse me. From the beginning of incarceration, this bothered me a lot. It was easier for me than for others because I am married and my husband is understanding. He protects my social position in the community. My immediate family is religious. They believe that if a woman goes to jail she will lose her virginity. They could have had a bad idea about me if I hadn't been married."*

It doesn't stop here. The relationship of the prisoner with the prison has a lot of effects on the profession and future employment possibilities, even on his or her siblings. Indeed, there is a collective punishment that leaves many negative effects on family life. The prisoner will fall into a dividing crisis. One female prisoner said, *"the arrest reflected itself on the families in a direct way, both materially and psychologically, like prohibiting siblings of prisoners from obtaining government employment. Mentally, the families pay a high price in addition to the exclusions and sadness, even regarding life choices, attitudes and feelings."*

Acceptance of the Social Environment

In a question about the events of his imprisonment that still affect him negatively, Gh.A. focused on what he describes as *"the absence of politics in society causing the misunderstanding of my arrest, especially among those who tend to extend advice by telling you "Grow-up, you don't need these things."*⁶

Gh. A. also described how society was sympathetic to him, but was at the same time strongly fearful of the security services.

⁶ From the forum "Memory"

“I can’t mention my arrest in my neighborhood or at work, because they will be afraid of what will happen to them by interacting with me.”

Even if the experiences of men and women prisoners are accepted and appreciated, the degree of such acceptance varies across cities and regions. Hama, for example, celebrated leftist prisoners during the 1980s (according to the experience of former prisoners), despite the existence of many differences in the political and social environment of Hama. This was a result of the political opposition environment in Hama at the time.

This was true for Kurdish prisoners, for whom the experience of the prison would place them in a position of positive discrimination. There are many reasons for this, the most important of which is the nature of the national struggle of the Kurdish minority in Syria. Social acceptance does not mean the end or the overcoming of the crisis. The economic variable could intervene to play a big role here, especially when children are involved. In the absence of NGOs concerned with the social and economic aspects affecting prisoners and their children, the case becomes individual and differs from one prisoner’s family to another. While some families would overcome the experience of the prison, such experience tend to create in other families real problems for children and parents alike, given that despite the existence of values of social solidarity in our society, there is always the fear of approaching such persons. In this respect, a number of marriage cases in which the family relationships with prisoners were intended to be observed, but difficulties occurred in arranging meetings, due to the sensitivity of the issue. Among those cases, there was the case of a woman who remarried following her separation from her imprisoned husband. In another case, a woman waited 10 years for her imprisoned husband, only to get separated from him after his release, and both would get married separately. There are cases of divorce, even involving children, that occurred after the prisoner’s release. In some situations couples would remain unhappily married. They keep the marriage alive for the sake of their children. In the case of one engineer unable to return to work, his wife used the time of his absence to become the family decision-maker in financial and family matters. This created a lot of disagreements as the economic factor played a decisive role. The prisoner had no work upon release, which affected the marriage, given that his release did not help in changing the status and role of the family members and their relations to each other. The economic responsibility remained with the wife, which prevented the released prisoner from re-assuming his role as a head of the household, thus exacerbating the crisis.

The economic factor is an element of balance and stability. It contributes in helping the prisoner overcoming many of the negative effects of the experience of release. Nahed Badawiehe⁷ said that her return to work and her colleagues’ acceptance have played a positive role in preventing her from falling in a crisis with society. This continued even after leaving her job to work as an independent engineer.

⁷ Former political prisoner for four years because of membership in the Communist Labor Party.

Parent-Child Relationships: Examples.

The problem of the released prisoner is not confined to the acceptance of the family and the social environment, given that those who experience the prison and political activism, are generally aware of the conditions and circumstances which lead them to imprisonment. This tends to facilitate the balance of the prisoner in his relations with others. In contrast, a problem-crisis that is on a high degree of sensitivity and influence, arises, namely the relationship with children, especially for those prisoners who have spent long periods in prison. Following release, they would find their children as grown up person with psychological and social composition that were remote from their direct supervision.

The issue of the relationship with the children goes beyond the family structure to the psychological composition of the prisoners' children who are not treated fairly at both the official and social levels. Therefore, the released prisoners often found difficulty in dealing with their children who had suffered from the consequences of their relationship with fathers as political-prisoners. We quote here some of the testimonies on the subject from an unpublished research by Yassin Haj Saleh, who experienced political detention himself over a long time:

For months, S.A, who spent 15 years in prison, has suffered from the difficulty of a mutual understanding with his young daughter who had turned fifteen upon his release in 1998. The mother was pregnant of her when the father had been detained. The mother had also been arrested for a short time with her husband in 1983. According to the mother, the man, who left prison at the age of forty, and the teenage girl were competing to win her as they exhibited reciprocal jealousies.

F.M, who spent 10 years in prison, was confronted to an opposite situation. He was released in 2000. He had heard about the difficulties that faced his newly released prison mate, with their children. He deliberately did not interfere in the life of his son aged 17. After two years, the reserved son complained that his father was indifferent to him and not interested to know what were his thoughts and needs. The daughter who was in her thirteen, used to shrink when her father would put his hand on her shoulder, and for few months, she would act with reservation for example by refraining to take off any of her clothes in front of him. Yet, the cases of S.A and F.M could still be regarded as attenuated examples, when compared to many other cases that were more difficult."

M.D who was a member of a left-wing party failed to rebuild his relationship with his daughter who was 12 years old when he was released after eight and a half years in prison. The daughter says that, for a long time, her father was dealing with her as a child aged four (as he left her before his arrest). Despite this, he always criticized the behavior and

the taste of her generation and reminded her that his generation was better than hers. She summarizes his attitude as follows: "He discusses with me as an adult and deals with me as a child." Because she believed that he wanted her life to be like his, she told him that she wanted him to return to prison. When she was sixteen, her discomfort from her father reached the level where she would go as far as taking sleeping pills with the intent to commit suicide. However, instead of dying, she slept 20 hours. Thus she decided to continue taking sleeping pills to grow while she is asleep, in order to lose sense of time, and to avoid seeing her father. She would enjoy him taking her from a doctor to another and conduct expensive medical tests (e.g. analysis of the functions of the heart and brain, CT scan, MRI, etc...), in his attempts to explain the reasons for her lengthy sleeping. She says: "I was happy to see them tired because of me." Two long months passed before they know the reason for the lengthy sleeping. Then, little by little, a spirit of communication emerged between the girl and her father, as she explained. She started to love him so much without stooping to criticize him sometimes. "She discovered that the love of the father comes from the shared experience of life and participation and not on its own. "There was no presence of a father in my previous memory. He comes suddenly. He was my father and ... that's it. "

One would also add the case of the direct and frank blame, by children, of the experience of political action which led their parents to jail (e.g. the case of A.B). In many cases, it is difficult to blame the children for their disgruntled and negative attitudes against their parents, as the prevailing social culture does not usually appreciate political activism which often leads to prison. On the contrary, there are social values that praise the art of escaping from evil and remaining on the sidelines of life. Therefore, the son or daughter, who feel that their society and culture did not treat their parents fairly, tend to denounce their experience, perhaps due to their own dissatisfaction from the negative consequences on their social and professional lives just because they were sons of political prisoners.

Psychological Adjustment :

"The prison is a negative world in every sense of the word. Nobody wants to try it. But if forced to deal with prison, there must be means of adaptation to this new world." (H. A.)

Most of the prisoners admit that there are several psychological effects of the period of detention, some of it is not obvious, as some prisoners attempt to hide them considering that talking about those problems would shake the positive experience of the prisoner, in all its heroic components, as it is a real and realistic part of political activism in Syria. A. KH says: *detention caused an emotional split with my family as well as the fear of some of my friends to communicate with me, especially after release .The arrest also caused a state of anxiety and tension, which was reflected in the relations within the family. "*

Nahid Badawiah candidly confesses that the volume of the pain and the sense of humiliation and torture have led to the loss of the humane within one's psyche, in the sense that one would deal with pain and torture in relative terms, as though a natural thing. This is an important loss of one's humanity. She considers that it would be impossible to return again, because the period in the prison involved an adaptation with bad conditions.

Trust in others significantly decreases following the prison's experience. This may be due to the unjustified harshness and repression of interrogators and prison guards, as one discovers certain types of individuals, who are diverse in the degree of displaying hatred and contempt for human beings. To get to a different reality tends to create real problems for the prisoner on a psychological level and at the level of communication with the community. The failure to talk about such problems may lead to further crises. In this regard, Duha Askari courageously states that: *" detainees are released in very bad conditions. We have a high degree of responsibility and we feel it is inappropriate for us to complain. If we do so, we disserve our ideas and our experience, although this is natural. However, denial and arrogance are not possible. "*

This becomes more difficult, as the effect of such experience appears harder in the presence of children, all the more who have grown in the absence of their parents in prison. The absence of parents for the upbringing of children creates clear crises in the relationship between the two parties. The crisis appears more pronounced in its psychological part, which is difficult to overcome at the beginning of any relationship between the parents after leaving prison and the children. Such a relationship may escalate, or be diluted, but this does not mean that it won't exist.

The former detainee M.KH says: *" briefly, I have suffered at least in a particular aspect of this matter. With regard to my wife, after six years from the date of my release, things have started to become better now, but I lost touch in my relation with my children. They simply say: you are not our father, our father has died "*

As for the tempers and personal habits, it differed from a prisoner to another. It seems that the prison conditions and the length of detention play a role here as well. Most of those we met have seen their tempers evolving for the better to become more calm and deliberate. This of course is not because of the good condition of the prison, but it is due mainly to the success of the prisoners in creating the means of adjustment within the prison and in controlling the harsh tempers and dispositions that were likely to cause them a number of inconveniences inside the prison. Others admitted that they experienced bad temper because of the prison, including hyper-irritation, a moody character, quick tiredness, and often irritable and nervous character, when dealing with others in debates.

The Post-Prison Economic Condition after:

After his release, the return of the prisoner to his former job or finding a stable employment play an important role in helping him re-engaging in the community and starting to overcome the crisis associated with the effects of the prison. It would specifically help him replace his experience in a positive context on two levels : the personal and the social. (Akram Bunni, Nahed Badaouia, Abdullah Fadil , Haitham Hamoui, Yahya Cherbji). In the case of the latter, this was evident, as his former private sector employer has reinstated Mr. Cherbji because he was an able artisan. However, Yahya has returned the matter to the business calculations of profit and loss. This was also true in the reinstatement of Haitham Hamoui as a repeater at the faculty of medicine. The reinstatement to work has eliminated obstacles and significantly eased crises that may arise from marginalization at the social level. Doha Askari says : *"Deprivation in all its forms and types, the usurption of hopes, and the scarcity of available options financially and morally to me and my family make, to some extent, every day since I left the prison a struggle to build an interrelation with life actually lost, and to maintain the potential of humanity left in me.*

The Return to Political Action:

The return of a significant number of detainees from the Syrian left to public affairs contributed to overcome the post release crisis. This may pave the way for a new look on political action in Syria. The re-engagement in political action in Syria has removed many of the obstacles in front of individuals and eased significantly crises that may arise from marginalization at the social and the work level as well. But all this is primarily related to the general social atmosphere, which means the social acceptance of the prisoner, and the placing of his experience in its proper context as an individual who has offered a large part of his life to the public interest, especially to obtain better changes and reforms. Therefore, the social support (moral and material) depends upon the surrounding environment. The differences depend on the degree of political culture in every society. Difference may exist in the ideological contrast, as some of the relatives may belong to the ruling institution, both as a matter of ideology and work, which results in the development of unfriendly situations between them and the prisoner and his family. There are obviously differences depending on cities. In many cases, the prisoner's friend would distance themselves from him, probably because they would be reasoning from a purely narrow consumerist perspective that is completely disinterested in public affairs, which would lead to the depiction of the prisoner's interest in public affairs as an accusation.

Those prisoners who did not return to political action justify the reasons for this as follows:

The tyranny of ideology, weak political movements, weak political action, the difference in political ideas by the passage of time, lack of enthusiasm for the work, and apathy and indifference.

But the return to political action is related to other conditions, the most important of which would be the opportunities available to the prisoner. (Yassin Haj Saleh) sees in this regard that " in general, the opportunity available to leftists and non-Islamists detainees to re-engage in political and cultural public work is broader than the opportunity available to Islamists.

Some have tried to operate a complete rupture from all what reminded them of their political legacy. Unauthorized political organizations have become exhausted in the early 1990s, if not collapsing. There are some tragic anecdotes that are recounted on persons who would divert their route while walking just because they would notice a prison mate coming towards them. They have transformed their fear from the authorities to a hostile attitude from anything that could remind them of arrest, torture and imprisonment. When they participate in their former party's event, they do so under cover with extreme secrecy. This condition continued until the late 1990s. However, many of the leftist detainees have resumed work in public affairs in different ways: for example, they transformed their engagement in politics to an involvement in culture or from the affiliation to a political party to a membership in a human rights organization. As for the Islamists, the role of the security restrictions was crucial in limiting their participation in public affairs.

The Post-Prison Security and Economic Conditions and their Effects:

The continuing effects of the detention after leaving jail are one of the main reasons that prevent or slow the overcoming of the prison periods and its pains. Such effects spread over a range of matters, which are equally important.

Economic Conditions:

In reply to a question put to him about what were his present wishes, (F.M) says: *"I hope to find a job that suits my health condition, and which helps me secure my daily allowance and break the void that I live in."*

The desire of (F.M) is shared by most of the released detainees who are not lucky in finding suitable jobs, which on the one hand allows them to secure their livelihoods, and on the other hand help them in realizing a certain self-fulfillment.

For those who were university students when they were arrested, they were able to return to the university after release, and to complete their studies, *" the sight of men in the thirty or even in the age of forty was familiar at the University of Aleppo, when I returned back to my studies between 1997 and 2000. I was 16 years older than my colleagues. But, in 1997 / 1998, there were five others who spent between six years and 12 years in prison in my class. During the years of the university, the prisoner would either rely on the support of his family, or combining employment with education."*

As for those who were public servants, their reinstatement would depend upon a decision of the security services. There were no particular rules in this context. *"The ways in which the authorities dealt with prisoners, who had been public servants was arbitrary. It did not follow any particular rule. Some were reinstated and have been able to receive their outstanding salaries, while some have not been reinstated, and were prevented from getting any job in the administrative, productive or educational sectors of the government."* Of course, one should not overlook the fact that those prisoners who were deprived from their civil rights, have been unable to return to their jobs in any way.

Undoubtedly, the economic condition of the former detainee has a major impact on the various aspects of his psychological and family life as we pointed out earlier. In addition, the health condition of the released detainee limits in many ways his chances of finding a suitable employment in a society that already suffers from high unemployment rate.

Deprivation of Civil and Political Rights:

Not all Syrian political prisoners were referred to the judiciary. Some of them spent the entire period of their detentions under martial law orders without a sentence. Others were brought before exceptional courts following short and long periods from arrest. Those who were referred to trial were either brought before field marshal military courts, or before the Supreme State Security Court. Both courts are part of the exceptional judicial apparatus, which is exempt from the requirement of due process, and its sentences are not subject to any challenge or appeal.

In addition to the prison sentence which ends with release, the effects do not stop after this release, but will continue for many years thereafter.

One notes that the penalties for political felonies, in accordance with the Syrian Penal Code are as follows: life and temporary detention, house arrest and civil deprivation. The penalties for political misdemeanors are: simple imprisonment, house arrest and fine.

In political crimes that are deemed felonies, civil deprivation is usually ordered as an original punishment, while it is ordered as a secondary penalty with respect to common law crimes. Its effect continues until the tenth year of implementation of the original punishment. As to judicial rehabilitation, it requires the lapse of seven years for felonies and three years for misdemeanors as of the date of release of the convicted. One further notes that civil deprivation usually entails : the dismissal and exclusion from all public functions and services, the denial of pension by the state, the dismissal and exclusion from all functions and services in the management of a community or a syndicate to which the convicted belongs, the deprivation from any pension or salary by his community and the denial of the right to take up any mission in public or private education.... etc." This means that the person concerned has to start life from zero in already very complex and difficult circumstances.

As to restraint, it deprives the convicted from the exercise of his rights over his properties. It ceases to produce effect upon the release of the convicted, following the end of the enforcement of the penalty. Yet in many cases this remains theoretical, as restraint is in practice illegally enforced upon those released from prison. It should be noted that

restraint would arrest the person's capacity in disposing of any of its urgent life affairs such as undertaking the purchase of a property or getting a loan ...

A.F says: "The restraint was due to be removed upon my release, which came following an amnesty that I benefited from together with a group of other political prisoners. However, it continues to be enforced upon me until today. When I followed this matter with the Supreme State Security Court, which sentenced me to prison, with civil deprivation and restraint, they said that the restraint will continue until the end of my original sentence which means that I should wait ten years to see the restraint lifted. This is absolutely illegal and illogical as well."

Consequently, civil deprivation and court-ordered restraint constitute an additional burden and another violation of the right of the prisoner. Such measure continues to be in force for a long time following his release.

Security Services Recalls

"Security continues to deal with us as former detainees, as though we were second-class citizens or as subjects who should not move out of their sight." A. B, former detainee on charges of belonging to the banned Muslim Brotherhood group.

Released prisoners from the Islamic factions are systematically forced to report to the security branches. Such requirement is, albeit some exceptions, usually not enforced on most of the former detainees who are affiliated to other political currents.

Such coercive visits generate chronic psychological pressure on the person, especially if we take into account that the line of questioning during such visits usually revolves around such questions as: "Who visited you? Whom did you visit? What did you do in the previous period? What are the sources of your subsistence?... etc. Such line of questioning lets the prisoner under the constant impression of surveillance and anxiety. It is the opposite of what the prisoner needs in terms of a sense of safety after release.

It also affects the possibility of the prisoner's communication within society, which leads him to restrict communication to a minimum, so that it becomes limited to the family and the close friends.

In many cases, the former prisoner may be required to visit a security branch located in a different district from his domicile, which entails that he sometimes should travel from one city to another, with all the additional costs and trouble resulting there from.

It is noteworthy that the periodic security recalls are being enforced against both the detainees for long periods before 2000 and the detainees after this date.

Freedom of travel and movement

Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Syria provides:

- 1. Everyone lawfully within the territory of a State shall, within that territory, have the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence.**
- 2. Everyone shall be free to leave any country, including his own.**
- 3. The above-mentioned rights shall not be subject to any restrictions except those which are provided by law, are necessary to protect national security, public order (ordre public), public health or morals or the rights and freedoms of others, and are consistent with the other rights recognized in the present Covenant.**
- 4. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to enter his own country.**

Most of the former detainees suffer from restrictions on their freedom of travel and movement. They are not given passports, and are prevented from leaving the country by one of the security agencies, which frequently is the security service that had originally arrested them.

There are no rules that determine who would be prevented from leaving the country after release.

In practice this is not directly related to the detention background or the period of detention or the activity of the detainee after release, although many of the previous reasons may be an aggravating factor in the decision to prevent a prison from traveling. The travel ban is generally left to the arbitrary determination of the security service which proceeded in the arrest.

One further notes that many of the former detainees are in urgent need for travel, either because of their deteriorating health as a result of long periods of imprisonment, or because of the physical and psychological pressures they face after their release, or because most of their family members are in exile and often unable to return to the country. The travel ban would prevent any family reunion with the former detainee.

"M.N" who was detained for six years because of his Islamic background says that he could not see his father after release because his father have been leaving in exile for nine years. M.N was struck by a travel ban and the father was prevented from returning to Syria. *"I was able to visit my father every summer before my detention, but since my release I was prevented from traveling and could not see my father who is nearly seventy years old and his health is not very well."*

"S. P" who spent two and a half years in prison because of his Islamic background after having been extradited by one of the Western countries, is still prohibited from leaving the country following his release last year, despite the fact that his wife and children live abroad." *My wife is not Syrian. She works where she lives with our children. If they come back to Syria, how can I feed them while I am deprived from civil and political rights and could not yet be able to find a suitable job that corresponds to my university degrees which I spent long years to earn them?! I cannot work here because they do not accept to employ me. "*

But the critical health conditions of former prisoners remain the most pressing problem affected by the travel ban. Faris Murad, was released in February 2004 after 29 years spent in prison on the background of his affiliation to the Arab Communist Organization. He is suffering from an acute spondylitis, a convulsive inflammation in the respiratory tract, a high blood pressure and an essential heart aescemia.

Mr. Murad needs a surgery that is performed only in a limited number of European countries. Despite the passage of more than two years of his release, he still could not obtain a passport.

One notes that travel bans are purely based on security decisions that are not supported by any judicial decision of any kind. It is a measure enforced upon former detainees in addition to other civil society and opposition members.

Some activists have filed lawsuits before the Court of Administrative Adjudication. They have obtained judgments suspending the effect of such travel bans. However, such judgments remained unenforceable, because the security services continue to assert a rank above the judiciary and the law.

Human rights organizations and Political Detention

"In spite of what the humanitarian and human rights organizations and individuals in Syria have done or are doing on the issue of detainees they can be reproached of dealing with the matter as a quantitative issue. It ends when numbers or quantities are released from prison. I believe that the issue is more a qualitative one, which concerns the social space in Syria and should become an issue of a wide reach as it expresses the aspirations and ambitions of the society as a whole. The extent of dispersion and loss of the political detention case as well as its figures is a setback for all. For as much as the detainees defend themselves when they are out of prison, as much as they defend their trampled rights, they extract recognition of their political, social and civil rights as a minority that has been brutally persecuted for a long time long, and inasmuch as they seek to wipe out their sufferings, they give their lives and experience a meaning and an example to follow. You say to memory? I do not want to forget. But in order not to fall in the trap of the recycled frustrating, humiliating and frightening pain for future generations, I say: let's work." Doha Askari.

Civil society organizations that are recently founded in Syria are still unable to provide concrete assistance to the released detainees. The assistance extended by such organizations and especially - local human rights organizations – is limited to the provision of information on some of the problems of former detainees, such as civil and political deprivation, court-ordered restraints and travel bans.

This is due to the nature and performance of these organizations and the circumstances in which they work, either because they are non-licensed, which prevents them from enjoying a certain legal legitimation, or because of their limited material resources due to the fact that they are prohibited from accepting foreign funding. In addition, the pressing security environment, hinders any activity in the public sphere in Syria.

International organizations provide limited assistance to a very small number of former detainees. Such assistance mainly concentrate on providing donation for medical treatment to those released in critical health conditions.

Instances of solidarity among former detainees occur on an individual basis. Such solidarity relies on personal relationships, with the exception of one case, which we describe as follows.

On February 8, 2005, 387 former male and female detainees signed a petition identifying a set of demands concerning the post-prison conditions of former detainees, which needed to be tackled. A follow-up committee has then been formed for three months to pursue these demands with the official bodies concerned. Such bodies requested to meet with a number of the signatories to discuss with them the content of their demands.

The Committee attended and was led to believe that there were directions from the President of the Republic to examine such demands and to prepare the necessary file by the bodies concerned.

The Committee was led to understand that the file had already been prepared, and was sent to the Office of National Security, to be then referred to the Presidency Office. Such official orientation was depicted as positive and serious. Yet the time frame for actually implementing it may extend even beyond September to show some results.

The Committee has asked the concerned security agency again under the pressure of questions of many former detainees who were motivated by the State positive step. However no new development was to be announced by the security service concerned, except the reiteration of the same affirmations about the seriousness of the matter and the time-scale. When the mandate of the Committee has reached its term, it sought to approach the newly appointed head of the Office of National Security. A meeting has indeed taken place. The official confirmed that there would be a decision to lift the deprivation enforced upon the convicted political prisoners on the grounds that this was the greatest obstacle for the detainees and the most wanted issue. He added that he had not seen the file submitted to his office and promised that he would study it within a short time and give feedback. Recently the newly elected Committee of Detainees has met the the Head of the Office of National Security, but it did not get any clear answer in respect of the pending issues.

The Committee reiterated its demands which included:

- 1- The cancellation of the effects of sentences issued against us and the right to get rehabilitated.
- 2- To receive material compensation to each of us according to the years of detention, regardless of whether the prisoner was a civil servant or not at the time of arrest, and to consider the years of imprisonment and the years thereafter as an actual service. This should include those prisoners who have been layed-off following their release.
- 3- To reinstate those who couldn't return to their jobs, and to admit prisoners who were not working with governmental bodies before their arrest, if they so desire.
- 4- To consider the years of security taping as years of detention and deal with it in the same way.
- 5- To cancel the decisions of mobilization to compulsory military service for every prisoner who was arrested or, or whose service was postponed without his consent, and to demobilize those who were taken to their military service.
- 6- To grant passports to all former political prisoners and to cancel all travel bans and other security measures.

The idea of this petition did not receive a wide response from former detainees for several reasons. Some former prisoners told us that the reason was that the matter was dealt with through its humanitarian dimension only without its national and political dimensions. Some considered that the way to proceed in such matters should not have been through the security agencies, as happened, but with the political authorities. In any event, this initiative has failed to achieve any of the demands of the former political

detainees until this moment, in light of the lack of response from the Syrian government to deal with this issue positively.

In this vein, the former detainees whom we met are unanimous in considering that there is a need to take practical steps by the former detainees themselves, for mutual assistance in order to overcome the difficulties that they face in life after prison even if such mutual assistance remains minimal.

Duha al-askari says : *"I suggest to form a syndicate for detainees to improve their conditions inside and outside the prison. The released prisoner has lost a lot, and needs to restore his life, work, study as well as his psychological and social position. The former prisoners who have experienced the suffering and managed to overcome it are probably the best suited to assist others who did not overcome the ordeal yet. "*

while Rosette believes that *"there is a need for community and civil society associations to protect the prisoner and his family morally and materially, in addition to the need for an institution that takes care of the children of prisoners under emergency laws"*.

Akram Bunni believes that *"we need to create a culture that commands activism in public affairs. This requires joint efforts by all. It is necessary to rehabilitate activists and honor them. This needs associations and active movements that would, on the one hand transform the collective conscience in order to create an alternative to the prevailing culture, and, on the other hand, to integrate the prisoners in economic and cooperative projects.*

Summary and Recommendations

It is clear from the previous presentation of the different experiences of political prisoners, that the external socio-economic conditions are the main obstacles to the process of the return or integration of the prisoner in social life, and his effort in overcoming many of the crises that are attendant to this experience.

Therefore, we find ourselves not only driven by the demand for the rights of prisoners, but also for the implementation of a program of action involving active movements with society including all concerned organizations, associations and individuals of all backgrounds.

Although any proposals for a Program of Action would be difficult to achieve on a practical level, it is important to state them clearly, with the possibility to include other proposals that may be brought to bear in the perspective of activating work on the ground:

At the level of local civil society:

- **To seek to establish a civilian institution of political prisoners formed by former prisoners and human rights activists, which would include a variety of specialized bodies that would deal with the economic, practical, social and psychological aspects of the post-prison experience, in the perspective of finding practical solutions to individual cases institutionally, within the available capabilities. This includes helping to provide suitable employment opportunities, and economic, legal and health assistance, etc.. by linking with groups of specialist volunteers.**
- **To intensively take up this topic in the media with a view to encouraging locally and internationally human rights organizations both local and international to take part in raising this issue by exerting pressure on the Syrian government to become attentive to this issue.**
- **To file lawsuits for extra-judicial arbitrary detention, and to claim compensation for the damages caused to the detainee.**

At the level of international and regional human rights organizations:

On the one hand, to coordinate action between the local bodies and international and regional organizations with a view to helping in the critical cases having a health, psychological or economic dimension; and on the other hand, to address the Syrian authorities with a view to resolving the cases of former detainees, including by granting them their full rights and by compensating them for their material and moral damage.

At the level of the Syrian government:

- **To repel unfair verdicts issued against detainees with all their legal consequence; To reinstate former detainees to work if they so wish, and to grant them full work compensation for the period of forced absence from work. It should be stressed that the resolution of the issue of the former detainees will not be through partial or selective solutions. Such resolution should include all former detainees regardless of their ideological or political affiliations or their respective periods of detention or whether sentences have been issued against them or not. This solution includes the humanitarian side, which cannot be completed unless the national and political dimension of it is also addressed. This includes the granting of moral and material compensation to former detainees for the periods they had spent in arbitrary detention, and honoring them in such a way as to preserve their status in society, as a group that suffered from an injustice and persecution because of its beliefs and ideas.**

Finally, it must be emphasized in addition to the preceding remarks, that there is a need to modernize and amend the domestic laws in conformity with international human rights conventions as ratified by Syria, which have become part of its national law, so as to ensure an end to the phenomenon of political arrests in Syria, and the protection of civil liberties and fundamental rights of citizens against arbitrary actions that may be taken against them contrary to the law and the requirements of justice.